

# **An autoethnographic exploration of “play at work”**

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## SUMMARY

**Title:** An autoethnographic exploration of “play at work.”

**Keywords:** play, playfulness, play-therapy, Positive Psychology, work-related well-being, play-based methods, autoethnography, adult play, workplace play.

**Abstract:** This research brings together two concepts that are often depicted as polar opposites. Sutton-Smith (2001) however suggests that the opposite of play is not work, but depression, and moreover echoes other scholars in reclaiming play as an essential human expression, even for adults. This study, therefore, argues that, given the precarious wellness territory our workplaces are in, something about work is not working. It is furthermore proposed that, given all the evidence of the therapeutic potential inherent to play, there is indeed something nutritious at play in play. Despite these well-supported arguments, play remains hidden away in the academic shadows of more serious industrial psychological preoccupations. Surprisingly, the same conspicuous absence is even mirrored in Positive Psychology, a bustling field that claims to celebrate glee, fun, and happiness (Seligman, 2002a).

Entitled “An autoethnographic exploration of play at work,” this dissertation leans on the metaphor of “exploration”, or more specifically, exploratory play. This results in two distinct yet interwoven dimensions to the research study. Firstly, the research approaches the phenomenon of play and play-based methods in workshop contexts through the lived experience of the researcher. Secondly, the research project in itself is conceptualised as work, and the methodology of autoethnography is conceptualised as a playful approach to this work of conducting research. Aside from widening the research scope, this also appropriately matches research methodology to the research domain. Aside from being *about* play at work, this research also *is* play at work.

Autoethnography, as a recent development in qualitative research, remains unconventional and somewhat controversial in the South African social sciences. Autoethnography, as an offspring of ethnography, offers a method to reflexively incorporate the researcher’s own lived experience in the study of culture as a primary source of rich phenomenological data. Instead of minimising the emotive and subjective, this research

amplifies and celebrates it. Given a fair degree of unfamiliarity in terms of autoethnography as well the accusation of being overly self-centred, the experience of the researcher is then complemented by the views of a number of co-creators to the culture being studied. This is done through external data-gathering in the forms of a focus group as well as number of semi-structured, dyadic interviews. While therefore leaning more toward postmodern themes, this research also incorporates what has been termed analytical autoethnography (Anderson, 2006), wherein the researcher is a full-member of the setting being studied, is portrayed as such and is committed to theoretical analysis. This study can therefore be summarised as an autoethnographic case study that balances evocative and analytical styles (Vryan, 2006) while emanating from the philosophical assumptions of interpretivism and subjectivism. Internal realities and meaning-creation are thus emphasised rather than the *received views* of positivism.

The central research question being explored is *how play and play-based methods promote work-related well-being*. To answer this question, *firstly*, play and play-based methods are explored, both from a theoretical and practical point of view. From within workshop (pedagogical) contexts, the play-based methods considered throughout this study include metaphor and story, creative-arts-based play, physical-body play and also the uncelebrated yet essential methods of icebreakers and games. A preliminary taxonomy is proposed for play-based methods to offer description and to facilitate reflection and learning. Descriptive elements in this taxonomy include interactive vs. solitary, competitive vs. cooperative, motor-sensory vs. cognitive-mind, participative vs. vicarious and rule-bound vs. improvisational.

Building on this exploration of play-based methods, the *second* aspect explored in more detail has to do with the more internal and subjective experiences of participants, or players, if you like. These experiences are then related to prominent concepts encountered in Positive Psychology to, by proxy, understand how they relate to work-related well-being. Significant themes that emerge from this include play as fun, play as mind-body integration, play as authenticity, play as community, and play as stress-relief and resilience. This is then woven into a creative non-fiction, in accord with a trend in qualitative research called creative analytical practices (CAP) (Richardson, 2000). This creative non-fiction, detailed in Chapter 4, forms a key autoethnographic output that animates all these themes in a way that is accessible, evocative and playful. Chapter 5 complements this chapter with an in-depth exploration of the research journey as a confessional tale. While adopting the metaphor of

hiking in mountains (exploring nature), this confessional tale clarifies the research process and incorporates an in-depth analysis of the themes, both in terms of research data as well as literature. This is supported by a number of separate appendixes, including interview transcripts, depictions of the interview analysis as well as a number of photos from the field.

In terms of its uniqueness and unconventionality, this research joins in the choir of related work to incorporate more contemporary research genres into the social sciences in South Africa. By doing so, it opens up doors to phenomena that simply resist being studied with the ontological and epistemological assumptions of conventional modern science. Furthermore, the effect and impact of this research is that it provides accessible and practical ideas as to how a synthesis of play and work can help us renew and rejuvenate our work and workplaces. That is, how we can come alive in the work contexts that risk becoming sterile, clinical and inhuman in the wake of Taylorist reductionism and efficiency. Given that state of work and workplace, and the productive and therapeutic potential in play, indeed, we are too busy not to play.

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## OPSOMMING

**Titel:** ‘n Outoetnografiese verkenning van speel en werk<sup>1</sup>.

**Sleutelwoorde:** speel, speelsheid, Positiewe Sielkunde, werk-verwante welsyn, speel-gabaseerde metodes, outoetnografie, volwasse spel, werplek spel.

**Opsomming:** Hierdie studie verken en integreer die konsepte van werk en speel; konsepte wat dikwels as teenstrydig beskou word. Sutton-Smith (2001) motiveer egter dat die teenoorgestelde van speel nie werk is nie, maar depressie. In harmonie met ander kenners en skrywers poog hierdie werk dus om speel te herwin as ‘n elementêre en noodsaaklike menslike aktiwiteit, selfs vir volwassenes. Hierdie studie argumenteer ook dat, gegewe die problematiese terrein van werk-verwante welsyn, is daar iets van werk wat bloot nie werk nie. Die studie verken verder hoe die terapeutiese potensiaal van speel op ‘n moontlike antwoord dui. Ten spyte van goedgestaafde en langstaande argumente rondom hierdie punte, is dit kommerwekkend dat speel in breed, en spesifiek volwasse-spel in die werplek, steeds in akademiese obskuriteit bevind word. Die afwesigheid van die gevraagde fokus is selfs sigbaar in die populêre veld van Positiewe Sielkunde, waar pret, genot en geluk klaarblyklik met erns bestudeer word (Seligman, 2002a).

Getiteld, “‘n Outoetnografiese verkenning van speel en werk,” rus dié studie op die metafoor van verkennings-spel en bevat dit twee aparte, dog interverwante dimensies. Eerstens benader die studie die speel-verskynsel sowel as speel-verwante metodes in werkwinkel kontekste deur die beleefde en deurleefde ervaring van die navorser. Tweedens word die navorsingsproses self as ‘n werk beskou, en die metode van outoetnografie word voorgehou as ‘n speelse benadering tot hierdie werk van navorsing. Hierdeur bewerkstellig dit ook ‘n gepaste kombinasie van navorsings-domein en –metodiek. Nie net gaan die navorsing oor speel nie, dit is ook speel.

Die outoetnografiese metode, as ‘n onlangse ontwikkeling in kwalitatiewe navorsing, is steeds taamlik onkonvensioneel en kontroversieel binne die Suid- Afrikaanse geestes- en

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<sup>1</sup> The title does not lend itself to direct translation because the phrase “play at work” is adopted to signify the multiple meanings inherent to the preposition “at”. Unfortunately, no convenient Afrikaans substitute exists for this.

sosiale wetenskappe. Outoetnografie, wat van etnografie af stam, bied 'n metode waar die navorser se persoonlike beleefde ervarings en refleksies geïnkorporeer word as 'n primêre bron van fenomenologiese en kulturele data. In stede daarvan om die subjektiewe en emotiewe te beperk, versterk en vier dit hierdie aspekte. By gesê, gegewe die relatiewe onbekendheid van hierdie metode tesame met aanklagtes dat outoetnografie skuldig kan wees aan selfgesentreerdheid, gaan hierdie navorsing 'n paar stappe verder deur die sienings en ervarings van ander kultuurgenote by te werk as ondersteunende bronne van data. Dit doen so deur middel van 'n fokusgroep sowel as interaktiewe, semi-gestruktureerde onderhoude. Alhoewel daar dus sterk postmoderne ondertone bespeur kan word in hierdie navorsing, sluit dit ook sekere moderne beginsels in deur te bou op idees van Anderson (2006) se analitiese outoetnografie. Hierdie studie kan dus opgesom word as 'n outoetnografiese voorbeeldstudie wat beide evokatiewe sowel as die analitiese benaderings kombineer (Vryan, 2006), terwyl dit stam vanuit die wetenskaplike filosofieë van interpretavisme and subjektivisme.

Die sentrale navorsingsvraag wat hier verken word, naamlik hoe speel en speel-gebaseerde metodes werkverwante welsyn bevorder, word benader deur eerstens speel en speel-gebaseerde metodes te ondersoek vanuit beide teoretiese sowel as praktiese hoeke. Gegewe die spesifieke konteks van werkswinkels, sluit speel-gebaseerde benaderings die gebruik van metafore, stories, kreatiewe beeldende kuns, fisiese liggaamspel, sowel as die gebruik van ysbrekers en speletjies in. 'n Voorlopige klassifiseringsraamwerk word voorgestel vir hierdie metodes wat bestaan uit die volgende: interaktief vs. solitêr, kompetierend vs. samewerkend, motories-sensories vs. kognitief-serebraal, deelnemend vs. middelik, en reël-gebonde vs. improvisierend. Hierdie raamwerk verskaf 'n manier om beskrywing te bied aan hierdie metodes, sowel as om refleksie en leer oor die toepassing daarvan te fasiliteer.

Tweedens word daar gebou op die verkenning van speel-gebaseerde metodes deur die ondersoek te rig op die meer interne en subjektiewe ervarings van die deelnemers, of spelers. Hierdie ervarings word krities vergelyk met konsepte uit Positiewe Sielkunde om te bepaal hoe dit verband mag hou met werkverwante welsyn. Speel as pret, speel as verstand-liggaam integrasie, speel as opregtheid, speel as gemeenskap en speel as spannings-verligting, is almal wesenlike temas wat deur hierdie analise in meer detail behandel word.

Beide die meer konkrete speel-gebaseerde metodes sowel as die meer introspektiewe belewenisse van speel word weergegee deur dit in 'n kreatiewe, nie-fiksie te verweef, in

strook met 'n tendens in kwalitatiewe navorsing genaamd kreatiewe analitiese praktyk (KAP) (Richardson, 2000). Hierdie nie-fiksie, soos vertoon in Hoofstuk 4, is 'n sleuteluitset van 'n meer evokatiewe form wat ten doel het om die temas op 'n dinamiese, lewende en toeganklike manier te vertoon. Hoofstuk 5, 'n belydenis verhaal, komplimenteer hierdie met gedetailleerde, analitiese verslag van die navorsingsreistog. Terwyl dit bou op die metafoor van natuurverkenning (stap), weerspieël dit ook kernbesluite en oorwegings oor die navorsingsproses tesame met detail analise van die temas en bevindinge. Hierdie word gestaaf deur 'n aantal bylae, onder andere ook onderhoud transkripsies en fotos.

In beide die uniekheid sowel as die onkonvensionaliteit, voeg hierdie navorsing sy stem toe tot 'n koor van kenners en skrywers wat meen dat dit hoog tyd is dat meer kontemporêre navorsingsmetodes oorweeg moet word in die geestes- en sosiale wetenskappe in Suid-Afrika. Dit open 'n deur vir die bestudering van verskynsels wat die meer moderne ontologieë en epistimologieë van konvensionele navorsing in hierdie velde teenstaan. Die effek en impak van hierdie studie sluit ook in dat dit toeganklike en praktiese idees bied tot hoe 'n harmonisering van werk en speel ons kan help om ons werkplekke te verfris, te vernuwe en te verjonk. Dit beantwoord die vraag van hoe werkplekke, wat die risikos van kliniese steriliteit en onmenslikheid loop in die nasleep van Tayloristiese reduksionisme en doelmatigheid, meer lewendig gemaak kan word. Gegewe die toestand van ons werkplekke en werkverwante welsyn sowel as die inherente terapeutiese potentiaal van speel, is ons inderdaad te besig om nie te speel nie.

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am drawn to a quote from E.L. Doctorow (Plimpton, 1988, p. 4) who once said that “writing is like driving at night in the fog. You can only see as far as your headlights, but you can make the whole trip that way.” Doing a master’s dissertation, any master’s dissertation, and perhaps especially a whacky one with an unstudied topic and unusual methodology, is thus aptly described. Doctorow also said that “writing is a socially acceptable form of schizophrenia” (p.4) In my case, the headlights that made this driving possible have also been the voices that kept me from going completely insane. An enormous amount of debt is owed to those bearers of light and voices of both guidance as well as encouragement.

I want to begin by acknowledging Prof. Johann Coetzee. Prof. Johann was the primary study leader for this dissertation and has been instrumental since its conception. He helped me to refuse the convenient and embrace the meaningful. I met Prof. Johann through supervision sessions he was asked to offer me and my teammates while we implemented a series of organisational renewal interventions. I liked him immediately and quickly uncovered a stronger connection that went beyond mere professional context. He rekindled in me a love for the profession and a desire to truly help. With his constantly challenging, cheeky and deviant attitude toward the status quo, I found much needed encouragement and inspiration to see this study through. Prof. Johann also offered needed support, a big picture perspective, excitement and motivation. He helped me to want to go where the light does not yet show.

I stumbled on another source of inspiration in the work of Prof. Willem Schurink. I met Prof. Willem during the process of finalising my research proposal and, without realising it at the time, he later became a co-supervisor, much to my delight. Prof. Willem’s dedication to qualitative research and his persistence to bring approaches like autoethnography into mainstream social science has offered me great consolation in times when I felt a little overwhelmed by the fog. Furthermore, through his practical methodological advice and constancy in supplying me with good material, he coached me around sharp bends and cautioned me on wet roads – a life-saving effort.

Aside from these two navigators and coaches, there have also been a number of passengers on the backseat that have helped me stay enthused, focused, and awake. In particular, I want to thank Hayley Kodesh, a colleague and friend, whose unselfish, persistent and humble presence has helped me give birth to this work. Hayley's support, ideas, and endless encouragement have not only helped me through, but reminded me about the kind of person I want to be. Another key role-player on the back-seat, especially in the conception of the research proposal, is Rhonel Van Loggerenberg. Rhonel, despite being a mere beginner in autoethnography herself, never shied away from confidently and poignantly sharing the lessons, ideas, do's and don'ts that she gathered from her research journey. Her clarity of mind and ability to quickly assimilate these lessons prodded me along in tough times. I thank her for her trailblazing efforts and generous stewardship, even in times of immense personal strain.

This research took place in an organisational setting, and would therefore not have been possible without the support from my leaders, colleagues as well as participants in the study. I owe a special word of thanks to Dr. Mias de Klerk. I acknowledge Mias for the unmistakable mark he has left on my confidence to facilitate playfully. He is a rare breed, a corporate grisly, who has demonstrated a cunning ability to harmonise warm, emotive and life-giving properties with the cold, hard and clinical dynamics of organisational life. To my colleagues, it has been an utmost pleasure to participate in organisational life, to co-create culture, and to impact the lives of participants in ways that made our workplace feel like home, and work feel like play. They have helped me to explore, experiment and discover. They have allowed me to be myself. Similarly, to the participants of our workshops, and in particular those that participated in this study, I acknowledge their openness, playfulness, honesty and generosity. In the places of our organisation's life where a vibrancy, dynamism and youthfulness persist, it is because of the air they breathe out.

In ways that I struggle to find words for, I also want to thank the friends and family that have supported me throughout this journey. They have been present at the Bon Voyage, popped up at gas stations along the road and were also, much to my surprise, awaiting me at the destination with fanfare and celebration. While writing this paragraph, the guilt of debt I owe them make me want to apologise to them - apologise for not being there. They wouldn't want me to and wouldn't let me. So instead, I acknowledge them for being here. I am deeply touched by their loyalty, commitment, love and belief.

If there is one person that deserves more praise than all the individuals above combined, it would be Anne-Marie, my lovely, beautiful, sensual wife and vibrant, funny, energetic playmate in life. Despite the taxing nature of much of the journey, the boring stretches, the dangerous corners, the burst tyres, empty petrol tanks and wrong turns, Anne-Marie held out. She was there when I got lost a few times. She was there when I got back on track. She hung on long enough for us to also discover interesting places together, share spectacular views and sunsets, and for us to laugh. We laughed when things were funny. We also, at times, managed to laugh when they were not. Ultimately, Anne-Marie was the loving and constant witness to my journey in a way that allowed me to live it openly, playfully and faithfully. We opened the dance floor on our wedding night with a song titled “I love you, I love you more...each day.”<sup>2</sup> Through her undying dedication, loving support and persevering presence, she has allowed for the lyrics of this song to remain true, truer . . . every day.

I owe the final and eternal acknowledgement to God, the ultimate “other”, the most significant audience for my life, my work and my play. He created me and blessed me with gifts, passions, opportunities as well as all the playmates mentioned above. He is the God of work, who made everything we can ever know and experience, and more. And when I look at a puppy play with a ball, or a kitten chase after a dangling piece of string, or a dolphin jump out of the water in Mozambique; when I see a little child on a swing, meet a few buddies for a braai, or hear my wife’s adoring laughter when we banter, joke, wrestle and make love, I know that he is also the God of play, and the God *at* play. In reference to a beautiful poem written by Gerard Manley Hopkins (see Chapter 4 for an excerpt of the poem), Peterson writes the following captivating thoughts about God and play:

The ... verb, "play", catches the exuberance and freedom that mark life when it is lived beyond necessity, beyond mere survival. "Play" also suggests words and sounds and actions that are "played" for another, intentional and meaningful renderings of beauty or truth or goodness. Hopkins incorporates this sense of play with God as the ultimate "other ... which is to say that all of life is, or can be, worship. (p. 3)

In being the God of play and the God *at* play, He has also whispered to me the clues of how to live this life according to His designs. I acknowledge Him for His playful fingerprints that are splashed out graciously onto the canvasses of his work. What an example!

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<sup>2</sup> Translated to English from the Stef Bosch’s song “Ik heb je lief, Ik heb je liever...elke dag.”

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## PROLOGUE

Between 2007 and 2011, my career took a turn. It turned upside down. In a way, it turned inside out. I came to reflect more deeply about myself, my practice as an Organisational Development (OD) Specialist and Facilitator, as well as the fingerprints I wanted to leave behind on work I do, the people I touch. First, I became a facilitator of people. I moved away from the stock-standard intellectualised, overly cerebral content facilitation towards becoming a facilitator of people, of personal insight, of relatedness. Then, I became a facilitator of play.

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*Four years ago.*

“What’s your motive for applying for this position?”

The man sitting opposite me, known to me only by reputation, now seemed less pleasant than I expected. The lady sitting next to him, the second and only other member of the panel, I had known for close to seven years. Her hospitality and warmth was present as always. The room where I was being interviewed was badly lit and a large boardroom table filled most of the available space.

“My motivation,” I started off while leaning slightly forward. Since I knew that this question should be expected (just Google “interview questions”), preparation wasn’t needed. I felt particularly connected to the answer. “I want to help create workplaces, teams, and jobs that are big enough for the human soul. People shouldn’t have to resign from life in order to ...”

“And what kinds of jobs are too small for the human soul,” the ‘bad cop’ interrupted me, “in your view?” I was momentarily caught off -guard. That line normally gets people to think a bit longer.

“Jobs, big enough for the human soul, just think about it!” I thought without speaking. I knew why I had studied Industrial Psychology in the first place, why I chose this career. And it wasn’t just about that. It wasn’t just about others. I had felt the corporate squeeze for the

previous few years. I needed something that could return me to my original idea. As a consequence, my CV was already in the market and one large consulting firm had invited me to a third interview. The job for which I was currently being interviewed came as a last minute surprise. I had slipped in through the back door because the good cop next to my interrogator had heard that I was looking to leave the company and they were short of applicants.

“Facilitator of Cultural and Whole Systems Transformation.” Fancy title, I thought. Say that quickly three times in a row. But the content looked appealing. It had organisational renewal, and facilitation written all over it. I would become part of a team of facilitators that would work at the coalface of restoring a human touch to the company. The work would therefore emphasise connection to self as well as connection to others, aiming to promote meaningful yet productive flourishing. It seemed that, amidst the often-experienced harshness of the corporate culture, the realization that long-term business sustainability is linked to the well-being of employees seemed to be sinking in. Phrases like “integrating head, heart and hands”, “bringing our whole selves to work”, and “holistic well-being” would later become common. Yes, it was the kind of job that organisations like our company normally outsourced to - well - outside consultants, and was coincidentally the exact reason I was looking over the fence.

My mind snapped back into place and I started my answer: “Money shapes the economy, and the economy shapes jobs. Jobs take up 70% of our lives, and if we’re not careful, jobs will shape our souls.” I was very aware of how burdened I felt in my current role. Yes, there were fulfilling aspects of it. But the workload was crushing and at least half of it was spent staring at a computer screen or being on a telephone. Let’s be clear; I am a Millennial through and through. I love technology and I am a big fan of digital gadgets and gizmos. But what I was asked to do with technology, administration, payments, reporting, emails and phone calls to mostly complaining customers, was cramping my soul.

“That sounds interesting, but I’m not sure I know what you mean,” asked Good Cop. “Can you think of an example to illustrate?”

It’s the job enrichment paradigms from the 60’s, stupid. Variety, significance, autonomy, challenge, creative stimulation, these things are necessary in jobs. I felt a little irritated that I needed to defend this, but being the interviewee, I smiled and continued: “When a security

guard spends 12-14 hours of his day lifting a boom for other to drive through, I feel sad. It feels to me like the job doesn't dignify him as a human being.”

“And who are you to question what is meaningful and challenging to people. Perhaps the economic empowerment the guard gets means more to him than interesting work means to you. Who are you to decide this?”

Bad cop was at it again, and I had that niggling feeling that he was right. I was perhaps passing judgement, projecting my own values onto others. Perhaps I should have based the answer on my own life, and not that of a security guard. I also wondered if Bad Cop caught my meaning at all. A phone call later that same day would confirm that he perhaps did. I got the job. I was going to become a facilitator in the spaces of renewal, growth, passion and, what I would realise much later, play.

*Two years later.*

We sat in a circle, close, intimate, without tables. The conversation was slow, deep, and meaningful. We were using mandatory “I” statements in order to “own” our views and speak with personal relevance. We came to know this format as “generative dialogue”. Dialogue, instead of debate, emphasises a need for meaning to be shared instead of verbal fights to be won (Senge, 2006).

Over the past few days, we had brought two new team members on board through an accreditation process. Since they had joined our team, they had undergone training similar to that we had experienced two years before. The process turned out to be a sort of rite of passage, which didn't happen too often. This was the first time we had recruited new people, since the turnover in our team was nearly non-existent. This was the first time in my career that I had gotten to know people at work this well. We became friends, comrades, counsellors, with even some speculation about lovers. I now realise that sitting in that circle was about more than just a physical arrangement, or a process. It also represented the intangible relationships among our team. The last two years of working, and playing together, had created a family. A home.

But this day felt a little different from home. Rather than feelings of celebration, the mood was a bit gloomy. I felt stuck. Our work had become routine. It felt like we were

getting stuck in the rut of monotony while mass-producing and “wors-machining”.<sup>3</sup> The feedback from the participants in our workshops was overwhelmingly positive. Our work was still meaningful. It made a difference. Why did I feel so drained? So stuck? While considering a few ways to liven things up, to breathe new life into our processes, we considered a few options. More experimentation, more humour and fun, different techniques, single facilitation instead of co-facilitation. But the cost of changing seemed a bit high, and the suggestions were met by resistance.

“No, we can’t change the format or flow of the workshops. A lot of thought has gone into it and it works. Tampering with it might destroy the magic.”

The comment came from one of my colleagues sitting off to my left hand side. “Magic? What is this, Hogwarts?” I thought, but didn’t say. I decided instead to align myself with the metaphor.

“Sure, it works. The magic, I think, is because our workshops are different for most people. It breaks out of the moulds of what people know about workshops. It is a change for them, and for most, an uncomfortable change.”

The workshops we carried into the organisation were indeed different. We de-emphasised theory and analysis. We slowed down the pace. We encouraged reflection and connection. Almost everything about them was different from what people had come to expect. And now, we resisted difference. I felt frustrated. I joined this team to break away from stifling monotony, following recipes and pre-planned steps. But now we were no longer exploring or breaking new ground.

The conversation went on. Burnout, isolation from a larger organisational relevance, and the restrictiveness of co-facilitation, all surfaced and were more deeply explored. But by the time we ended the dialogue, it was a comment from the facilitator that made the most lasting impression on me.

The facilitator interjected: “You can’t let it go on the way it is going. It is not healthy. It’s not sustainable.”

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<sup>3</sup> “Wors-machine”, from the Afrikaans “wors masjien”, is literally a machine that produces sausages, or “boerewors” (farmer sausage). In organizational settings, it has become synonymous with one-size-fits-all approaches that emphasise quantity above quality.

It was the same man who had interviewed me a few years earlier when I got the job. Although he had given me a grilling in the interview, I came to see him as a compassionate and wise mentor. The situation in the room reminded me of my interview two years before. I was in a similar place. Perhaps the grass is not greener on the other side. Some of our problems follow us around. Again, I managed to find myself in a place that felt too small for our souls. Our facilitator and mentor saw this, and he had a solution. His instruction, his two-word advice that followed, still echoes in my mind. I am licensed to experiment, change, add colour, add flavour, improve, have fun, and get wacky! How is it that we have missed this?

He said: “Play more!”

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Increasingly, over the last four years, I have moved towards methods in workshops that assist people with finding purpose, meaning, and passion. It echoes to a deep calling I felt and it motivated the reason I studied Industrial Psychology. It also explained why I ended up in workplace renewal initiatives. Together with some of my colleagues, we started experimenting, and playing. Instead of thick manuals with pages of written knowledge, we started bringing different tools. We brought metaphors, stories, paintbrushes, crayons, paper shapes, scissors and glue. We didn't bring tools. We brought toys.

The words of our facilitator still ring in my ears today: play more. I didn't always need this instruction. There was a time when I knew how to play. It was also a time when I knew that turning work into play makes sense. It came naturally.

Like the time, at a youth-camp, when we tried to turn kitchen-duty into a song. I've always been naturally drawn to the idea of whistling while we work. But the one place where this was the most difficult was kitchen-duty. The camp administrators allocated people to teams who took turns in washing all the dishes of the close-to-150 camp attendees. When it was our turn, being “the best team at the whole camp”, we tried something different. First, we tried to find hidden patterns in the dirty dishes and linked it to quirky wisdom quotes. “The leftover spaghetti on this plate looks like an ‘H’. You will marry a Hendrik one day.” We then tried forming two production lines and turned it into a competition. The line which got through an equal stack of plates first could leave the pots and pans to the rest. We ended off kitchen-duty by turning the evening into a song. We awkwardly tried to put some rhyme and rhythm to the work. More people joined in the improvised song, which could contend for the

worst song ever sung. The quality of the song wasn't important. The quality of the play was. The time went by quicker. The dishes got done. We enjoyed each other. We were the best team.

Then, there was the time I got two young cousins, aged 5 and 7 at the time, to help me wash my car. My good-hearted parents took these cousins under foster-care at a time when their own children started leaving the house. The result was, I had thought, strict parenting and firm discipline to teach them to behave and do their chores. I asked them to come and play a game with me. The car was our playing field, the bucket, sponge and hosepipe our toys. I gave them countdowns to test how quickly they could finish a specific part of the car. There were splashes, water fights, competitions and foam drawings. In the end, the car was clean enough. Perhaps what mattered more than the work was our relationship to work, I thought. Energised souls felt like a greater accomplishment than a clean car.

Play comes naturally. It taps intrinsic motivation. It is like a brush that turns a painting into real life. It is not something we need to learn.

It is something we need to remember.

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### ***Why start with a story?***

This opening narrative, on the one hand, hopes to serve as a basic introduction to firstly myself as the researcher, my views, background and motivations (more detail on this is provided in Chapter 5). Richardson (2000), in accord with other qualitative researchers, remind us that, “the researcher rather than the survey, the questionnaire, or the census tape - is the ‘instrument’” ( p. 925). It is therefore essential that this instrument is introduced, and I hope to have given the reader a useful preview.

On the other hand, I also started off in this fashion to sort of usher in the avant-garde style in content and format that is to be expected throughout this work. Yes, the dissertation you are about to read is unconventional, for good reason. In this, it borrows strongly from the idea that this is an *exploration*. While the term exploration is often used in academic studies, it has a deep relationship with curiosity (Kashdan, Rose, & Fincham, 2004). An even deeper relationship exists between exploration and play. Play theorists and developmental psychologists call this *exploratory* play. We see L. McMahon (2009) describe the

development of exploratory play as follows: “In *exploratory play* children investigate and make use of objects and solve play problems. Through their play, children build up their *knowledge of the physical world, developing concepts of space, time and number, conservation of quantity and volume, of cause and effect, increasing their sense of confidence and mastery* (p. 15, italics mine). McMahon makes this almost sound like hiking in mountains and exploring the outdoors. However, she continues to clarify that exploratory play develops into adolescence, and “may become thinking and playing with ideas in science and technology” (p. 23). I therefore find it apt to apply this metaphor of hiking to the exploration in terms of this research.

By thinking about exploring play at work, and also in approaching this research through playful exploration, here are a few questions that have fascinated me: What if this research was not only about play at work, but was in itself *play at work*? What if I could explore a topic much like I would a playground, a toy or a mountain-side? What if I could hold on to the curiosity, search for novelty, and embrace of uncertainty that are all properties of exploratory play? This would not only allow for the methodology or research approach to fit the research domain, but would also allow the research to bend back in on itself as an additional perspective to the phenomenon being explored. By approaching the topic of play at work through autoethnography, this has been exactly what I attempted to do.

### ***What to expect***

While the introductory chapter as well as Chapter 3 venture into sufficient detail on this methodology, because of its novelty and unconventionality, I find it prudent to prime the reader at this point about a few important deviations from conventional scientific writing.

Firstly, by using autoethnography, I am embracing alternative ways of knowing that incorporate personal, subjective, lived experience. The dissertation is for that reason written in first-person tense and contains grammar and text that is conversational and informal (most would agree that play celebrates informality). While some parts, especially Chapter 2 and 3 as well as elements in Chapter 5, are more analytical and contains a stronger academic tone, an editorial practice of conversation and informality is generally applicable throughout.

Secondly, because the very nature of autoethnography leans heavily on stories, idiomatic and metaphorical language are used throughout in an explicit attempt to illuminate the findings from that perspective. This idea is further tied to the overarching metaphor of hiking.

Hiking in various mountain ranges in South Africa has been the most prominent form of exploratory play that I have managed to retain into adulthood. As an amateur hiker, I have become acquainted with hiking as playful exploration, yes, but also as hard work. This metaphor, of exploration, hiking and mountains, is purposefully incorporated in a variety of chapters to support the overall theme of “an exploration of ‘play at work.’”

Thirdly, because both autoethnography and play embraces emotive, tactile, and sensorial in addition to rational, cognitive and analytical, the format of this dissertation has been adapted to reflect this. In cohorts with other trailblazers who have made palpable inroads by picking up autoethnography in the organisational settings, including a couple of local explorers (Avraamides, 2007; Huss, 2008; Van Loggerenberg, 2010), the reader will find colour-pictures, hand-drawn diagrams, and other symbols that have made their way onto the pages. This has been done in a deliberate attempt to introduce more play elements to the process.

*Picture 1. Exploratory play through hiking – a metaphor for play and work.*



Incorporating these play elements while walking in the relatively untested paths of autoethnography has not always been easy. At times, I have experienced frustration, self-doubt, and uncertainty. It has even been downright scary, similar to exploring the mountains, of hiking down the Camel in fog or getting stuck on Leslie's Pass. However, these apt deviations from convention have offered ways to bring together play and work in a confirmation of what Lamot (2007) observed about writing in general. Given some of these tensions mentioned above, she advises her writing students as follows:

I tell them they'll want to be really good right off, and they may not be, but they might be good someday if they just keep the faith and keep practicing. And they may even go from wanting to have written something to just wanting to be writing, wanting to be working on something, like they'd want to be playing the piano or tennis, because writing brings with it so much joy, so much challenge. It is work and play together. (p. xxix)

Considering then that this synthesis of play and work is quintessential to this research, instead of judging it against the more traditional criteria for "proper" social science, I invite the reader to join me as we explore the hills and valleys. There may be some mist to navigate through. There may be some vistas to appreciate. But let us maintain a curiosity. Let us explore. And let us play.